

A

LETTER,
ADDRESSED
TO
THE MEDICAL PROFESSION,
ON THE
ENCROACHMENTS ON THE PRACTICE
OF THE
SURGEON-APOTHECARY,
BY A
NEW SET OF PHYSICIANS.

BY MEDICO CHIRURGUS.

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LETTER, &c.

"In the race for wealth honour and preferment, a man may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve, and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors ; but if he should jostle or throw any of them down, the indulgence of the spectators is at an end ; it is a violation of fair play which they cannot admit of."

SMITH'S THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS, p. 207.

THE practice of the medical profession is universally acknowledged to be of so disagreeable a kind, that every one who enters into it must make up his mind before hand to endure great personal exertion, many privations, and various mortifications, with very inadequate remuneration. There is no other profession in civil life in which a man is required to make such great and constant sacrifices of his time and comfort, as in the exercise of this most useful science. The clerical profession, and the law, are exempted in a great measure from the toils it is attended with. A general practitioner in the country, more especially, has his time completely occupied in fulfilling the various duties of his situation, if his practice be such as to enable him to bring up his family decently, and secure a scanty pittance for

that portion of his life when his exertions fail him. The too frequent occurrence of the destitution in which the families of medical men, prematurely cut off, and the formation of societies to prevent the miseries consequent upon such events, too loudly proclaim the truth of this position. Whenever the medical profession, I allude particularly to the general practitioner, is made the subject of conversation in any society, it is always remarked that its members are most inadequately paid for the sacrifices they make, and in a much smaller proportion than other professions.

These points are generally urged in common conversation, as the most disagreeable parts of the profession; but there is one which is almost invariably forgotten, and it is, in my opinion, the most irksome of all. I mean the illiberality of the members of the profession towards each other. In a small circle, where men of the same age, and with equal pretensions to public favour, are struggling for pre-eminence, jealousies will arise, and are much to be lamented; but when this illiberality is unequivocally manifest in those who practice the higher branch of the profession, it is impossible to withhold the expression of contempt which such unworthy conduct naturally inspires.

It is now upwards of forty years since I entered the profession, and “ post varios casus,

per tot discrimina rerum," I am about to relinquish it, and seek in quiet, peaceful, and most moderate retirement, that rest which has long been denied me; and feeling as I do the greatest possible respect and regard for that most useful member of society, the general practitioner, in medicine, surgery and midwifery; I would call his attention, for a short time, to a system which has lately arisen, and which, if continued, threatens him with destruction, I mean the encroachments which are daily making by a set of men, who assume to themselves the style and title of physicians; but who, in reality, have no other right to call themselves such than a diploma can confer, obtained by the remittance of fifteen pounds to a Scotch University—a title which may be conferred on any farrier, at the pleasure of any two individuals inclined to indulge in such a joke. Since the conclusion of the peace, men of this description are to be found in almost every town, and in many villages, arrogating to themselves titles and distinctions, which they had never a right to assume, to the great annoyance of the regularly educated practitioner. That diplomas are purchased in this way cannot be denied, since it is a well known fact, that one University calculates on the receipt of two hundred pounds a-year, for this short and easy mode of obtaining a complete knowledge of a most difficult profession.

Educated at a provincial hospital, celebrated for the character of its medical officers, and filling afterwards, for several years, a responsible situation in one of the largest hospitals in London, I confess, that I felt great mortification at finding men of this description obtruded on me, as well as my neighbours, on many occasions. I might have more properly used the word disgust; for having filled a situation in life for which I was educated, and beyond which I did not aspire, and assuming no more than I was legally entitled to, I could not but feel disgusted at being brought into contact with men less entitled to consideration and respect than myself, because they claimed an invidious distinction.

A man of this description finding himself at the conclusion of a war idle, and not perhaps possessing the means of enjoying his “otium cum dignitate,” and the ability to undertake the various duties of the profession, purchases a diploma, and commences M.D. He gives out to the world that practice is not an object, but that having been accustomed to an active life, he wishes for something to amuse him, and that emolument is his least concern. His next care is to become acquainted with the general practitioner in the most extensive practice, and by one art or another he prevails on him to introduce him first to his friends, and by degrees to his patients. At first he is all

attention and kindness, but as his introductions increase, and he finds himself on firmer ground, his next care is to detach the patients of his unsuspecting friend, and lessen that confidence which he has long and deservedly enjoyed. This may not appear an easy task, but perseverance overcomes many difficulties; and when a man of this character once obtains a footing in a family, he will never rest until he has succeeded in supplanting their regular attendant. One mode of advantage is, that, having much leisure time, whilst the general practitioner is engaged in earning his daily bread, he will take frequent opportunities of making his professional visits in the absence of the surgeon, and by insinuation and other arts lessen his value and importance. The family will compare the extreme attention of the physician, with the occasional visits of the surgeon, who for the first time hears something like disapprobation, and hints of neglect—these gradually increase, and in the end the family is too often lost to the old attendant, and taken possession of by this notable physician, who reconciles them with the assurance, that his prescriptions can be very accurately dispensed by a neighbouring druggist, with whom he probably shares a profit on the medicine, a practice as notorious as the sun at noon day.

To introduce such a man to practice, a sort of

under plot must be carried on, in which the lady must lend her assistance; and if she should happen to be a fashionable woman, fond of visiting, and an adept at intrigue, she will at her morning calls and evening card parties, so loudly proclaim the Doctor's skill, that many must necessarily consult him under pain of exclusion from such agreeable societies. Instances may be found where acquaintances, having unfortunately complained of slight indisposition, on making a morning call, have been importuned to take advantage of the opportunity of having such excellent advice, although the sufferer had so little intention of doing so, as to come unprepared with a fee. Now the real views of this liberal physician begin to manifest themselves, and the rapacity with which he exacts his enormous fees, keeps pace with his opportunities.

Presuming on having practised the different branches of the profession, a physician of this cast is at one time found dressing a sore leg, or attempting to reduce a fracture, and at another officiously interfering in a lying-in chamber; which perhaps he enters for the first time in his life. No set of men are more clamorous for practice, and none less delicate in their mode of obtaining it; and that they succeed beyond their merits, is a truth that must be acknowledged. They wish to inculcate an opinion that they have

received from nature a secret propensity to all that is good and virtuous; and indulge the extravagant vanity, that they are by nature superior to all others. They have the effrontery to expect that, when they are consulted, the inferior practitioner, as they indecently style the family attendant, is to surrender the case entirely into their hands; and express great surprise when they find any man with sufficient good sense and regard for the welfare of his patient, not tamely to submit to their wishes. Inflated with a vain conceit of their acquirements, with an intolerant temper, they aim at universal dominion over their better informed and more deserving brethren; and varnish over their mean designs with an affected liberality.

Dr. Gregory, in his **Observations on the Duties and Qualifications of a Physician**, says, "As a doctor's degree can never confer sense, that title alone can never command regard, neither should the want of it deprive any man of the esteem and deference due to real merit. If a surgeon or apothecary has got the education and knowledge required in a physician, he is a physician to all intents and purposes, whether he is a doctor or not, and ought to be respected and treated accordingly. In Great Britain, surgery is a genteel and honourable profession. In most parts of it, surgeons are the physicians in ordinary to most

families, which their education and knowledge often gives them an undoubted title to be, and a physician is only called where a case is difficult, or attended with danger. There are certain limits, however, between the two professions, certain forms and pieces of good breeding to be observed, which the gentlemen on both sides must attend to, as they are established by the customs of the country, and by the laws of their particular societies. But I imagine a physician, of a candid and liberal spirit, will never take advantage of what a nominal distinction and certain real or supposed privileges give him over gentlemen, who, in point of real merit, are his equals; and that he will feel no superiority, but what arises from superior learning, superior abilities, and more liberal manners. He will despise those distinctions founded in vanity, self-interest, or the caprice of the world, and will take care that the interests of science and mankind shall never be hurt by a punctilious adherence to such formalities."

Now I am in no degree the natural enemy of the reputation, or rival of the practice of these gentlemen, but I would remind them that they are not always employed from the conviction of possessing superior attainments. Various other motives not unfrequently induce families to call in a physician, who have the fullest confidence in

the abilities of their medical attendant and friend, and after all abide by the opinion and advice which long experience has taught them rightly to value, notwithstanding the formal, although unnecessarily frequent, visits of the doctor. The physician may have a private fortune, which may enable him to enter a good deal into society, and he may, from his assumed situation, become acquainted with the best families in his neighbourhood. Some, therefore, employ him to obtain that courtesy and intimacy, which the contact so produced, and the mutual flattery consequent on it could only have created. Others, yielding to common custom, often consult a physician, not from any hope or expectation of deriving benefit from his advice, but that the world may be satisfied that the friends of the patient spared no expence, and that all was done that human skill could effect.

These and many such causes occasion consultations (as they are falsely called) so frequently, that death can hardly ever make a decent entry into a house, without having a physician for his chaperon.

Of late years, infirmaries and dispensaries have been established in many towns, and in forming them the managers have taken the great London hospitals for their model; but a difficulty has

always arisen when they have come to the appointment of physicians. In many instances, they have been obliged to depart from their plan and make special rules for the admission of those, who otherwise could not have been eligible.

In examining the libraries of these gentlemen, it is reasonable to expect to find a good selection of the best ancient and modern authors, by the study of which they may, in some measure, supply their deficiency of education; but here another disappointment meets us, for the only books which can be discovered are a few odd numbers of a **Medical Journal**, some of Scott's **Novels**, and the last edition of **Hoyle**.

It may be fairly presumed from the specimens of the surgical skill of these gentlemen, that their bad success in that department must have induced them to quit it for the more easy, and less responsible practice of physic, where their blunders are less open to observation, and may perhaps be buried with their unfortunate patients.

In the course of my life, it has once occurred to me to meet in consultation, on a case which I shall ever regret, two such physicians as I have been describing, and a greater burlesque I never witnessed. Nothing could be more amusing than the ridiculous form and etiquette observed by

both. After some time had been spent in descanting on professional reputation, skill, and points of precedence, it was determined that the one, who acknowledged himself to be the junior by the date of his appointment from Aberdeen, should, after inspecting and reporting the state of the secretions, commit the joint wisdom of both to paper, and after settling between themselves the amount of the fees, to which they, as consulting physicians, were entitled, the consultation broke up. The fate of the unfortunate patient might have been easily anticipated.

Can any thing be more disagreeable or painful to a well educated man, who feels that confidence in his own abilities, which a proper education, professional experience and attention naturally inspire, than to be appended to the tail of these sunshine practitioners; to be obliged to be a silent spectator of ridiculous formalities in the midst of deep distress; or what is often worse, of miserable practice? And if he ventures, from his previous knowledge of the constitution or habits of the patient, to offer an opinion, to find it treated with derision or contempt? I trust, however, that this, like all other bubbles, will soon burst; that the character of the enlightened, well educated, real physician will be, as it always ought, most highly esteemed; and that the general practitioner will be properly appreciated.

Of all characters, the trading physician is the most despicable. Sickness and anguish are his harvest—he rejoices to hear that they have fallen on any of his acquaintances, but looks blank and disconsolate when all men are at their ease. The fantastic valetudinarian is his particular prey, he listens to his frivolous tale of symptoms with inflexible gravity—he pretends to be most wise when he is most ignorant—no matter whether he understands any thing of the disease, as he knows his visit must inevitably terminate in a prescription. This is the being whose occupation is insured by politic connections, and whose trade is visits.

The truly estimable physician is a man of superior manner and humanity, of complete and liberal education, of sound and mature judgment. His whole life is a life of composure and study, his experience, founded on a perfect education, is daily improved by reasoning, by registering new facts, and by reflection, for which the nature of his occupation allows him ample time. His heart is upright, his conduct independent, and his principles pure and honourable. He is equally incapable of revealing circumstances of incapacity, or misconduct on the part of his fellow attendants, as he is of flattery or of vindicating or continuing measures of practice through policy, which his art or his understanding condemn.

During the greater part of my life it has been my happy lot to live on terms of the strictest friendship with a most excellent and worthy physician, whose professional reputation and private character were equally admired and esteemed. Qualified in an eminent degree for the practice of his profession, by a regular and superior education, and possessing the modest, retiring, simple manners, so much to be desired, and yet so rarely met with, uniting candour, and independence, with the most inflexible honour, and the greatest liberality ; and having an active and enterprising mind, always ready to relieve the sufferings of his fellow-creatures, he rose at an early period of life into extensive practice, and the most unbounded esteem. Kind and benevolent in his disposition, he abhorred equally roughness or inattention to the poor, or abject flattery to the great. He entertained a dignified contempt of petty quarrels, and a gentle disposition towards the profession. He disdained courting public favour by arts, which he had neither time nor inclination to practice ; nor would he ever pass half a day in the chamber of a sick baby of a wealthy patient, gossiping with nurses, nor refuse his assistance to a pauper surrounded by every thing loathsome. But, above all, he most conscientiously and scrupulously avoided saying or doing any thing which, by insinuation or any secret art, could blight the reputation of another,

or lessen a well-placed confidence. From such a character, the general practitioner never apprehended such conduct as is now too often to be met with. The following case will illustrate one part of the prevailing system:—

Every man who is properly educated to practice the various duties of the medical profession, must necessarily expend a very considerable sum of money before his studies are completed. On settling, he has generally to encounter great difficulties and opposition; but if he makes himself competent to practice, he will, after suffering for some years the most painful anxieties, and passing hundreds of sleepless nights, exposed to hunger and cold, work himself into a better line of practice. But even in this situation, he will often be excessively annoyed from the cause which is the subject of this letter. A surgeon-apothecary is called up soon after retiring to bed, from a hard day's work, to attend a patient in an acute disease, five or six miles off. Weary as he is, his necessities compel him to mount his jaded horse (for his fees are so trifling as to allow of no easier conveyance), and to make his way through the wind and the rain, in the darkest night, over fields perhaps to a farm-house;—where he finds his patient labouring under a severe attack of inflammation of the lungs.

He takes some active measures immediately, and waits, probably, two or three hours, cold and shivering in his wet clothes, the effect of the remedies he has employed. His first visit, at an early hour in the morning, is to this patient, who continues so ill as to require his attendance again in the evening; and these visits are repeated twice a day, often to the neglect of other patients. The disease continues with extreme violence, notwithstanding the vigorous and judicious treatment. Trusting, however, to his repeated experience in similar cases, he gives the patient and his friends hopes of a favourable termination of the complaint. Whilst affairs are in this state, an officious acquaintance advises a step, which he himself, under the like circumstances, would not undertake. He recommends that a physician should be called in, and knows none so clever as one of these self-created, or cheaply purchased doctors; who, because he claims a superior dignity, chooses his own time and convenience for paying his visit, and as his fees can well enable him, travels in his carriage, and arrives just in time to witness all the benefits of a judicious and well directed plan of treatment. The gaping multitude, assembled on this important occasion, not understanding the unintelligible jargon used, imagine that every thing which passes the lips of so great a

man must be extraordinary wisdom ; although at the same time they confess they do not comprehend it. Meanwhile, the patient gradually proceeds to convalescence, and his friends and neighbours congratulate him on the fortunate chance of calling to his aid so learned a physician, to whom, of course, all the credit of the cure is given ; whilst the man, who has had all the care and anxiety of the case, and to whom all the merit, if any, is due, is totally forgotten. The physician takes care to improve the advantage he has gained, pays great court to the friend who advised such a consultation, and never neglects an opportunity of calling on the patient, even for a year afterwards, when he happens to be passing that way, and reminds him of his desperate state, and unexpected recovery.

Cases of this kind occur very frequently, and I am at a loss which to admire most, the folly of the patient or the knavery of the physician.

I shall conclude these remarks with a few observations on the character and usefulness of the general practitioner.

The most anxious care of every head of a family is to select some confidential medical person, with whom he may live on terms of inti-

macy and friendship. A trifling disease often leads to most disastrous consequences; and it requires more than a parent's skill to discover such danger, or to avert it. It is not every indisposition that requires the formal advice of a physician, but the slightest requires the attention of some careful and skilful friend. To this friend he flies on every occasion when his mind is alarmed by the first approach of sickness in his family, and he finds, at all times and hours, his advice and assistance promptly and cheerfully afforded. He is his companion and solace in the most anxious and trying moments of his life—he has witnessed the loss of children and relations with him—alleviated many painful feelings by his kind and soothing attention—and dissipated the terrors of imaginary, as well as softened real dangers. Secure in his confidence and friendship, he recollects instances in which he has been instrumental in preserving to him the dearest blessings of his life, and has consoled him when almost overcome with despair. These feelings ought to endear a man to his medical friend, and make him always mindful of the obligations he owes to him, who has sacrificed health, time, and comfort, and watched with the most anxious solicitude, by day and night, the critical changes of a dangerous disease; and whose joy at the unexpected recovery of an amiable and excellent wife, and

mother, or darling child, can only be surpassed by the more anxious husband and father.

And it should not be forgotten, that the remuneration of such a man is trifling; particularly, as compared with the enormous and ill deserved fees of *soi disant* physicians. The folly of employing these men, who do not appear suited to either profession, will, I trust, become daily more apparent; nor ought they to ape the physician, or usurp the place of the general practitioner.

I hold it to be the duty of every medical practitioner to recommend a consultation with a physician in all doubtful and dangerous cases, and to yield to the wishes of a family, even though contrary to his own judgment; but I think the medical friend would sadly betray his trust, if he did not resist this innovation on his practice, and caution his patient against a useless expence, without a probable advantage.

THE END.

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